DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 395 665 PS 024 151

AUTHOR Eskesen, Karin
TITLE The Environment Is the Child's Condition.
PUB DATE [Oct 95]
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Active Learning; Child Development; *Classroom Environment; Documentation; *Educational Environment; Foreign Countries; *Parent Participation; Partnerships in Education; Preschool Education; Schools; *Student Participation; Student Projects
IDENTIFIERS *Piaget (Jean); *Reggio Emilia Approach; Royal Danish School of Educ Studies (Denmark)

ABSTRACT

Drawing upon the philosophy of several educational theorists and several educational approaches, this paper discusses the educational environment of Danish schools and preschools. Given the significant number of hours that children spend in schools, the importance of methods employed by the schools for the care and education of children is emphasized, in addition to close cooperation with parents. Noting that Piaget saw children as active creators, the significance of designing classrooms as flexible environments which encourage an active educational process is discussed. In agreement with the Reggio Emilia educational approach, which demands a constant analysis of pedagogical practice, documentation and its display in the form of themes and project structures to children, parents, and staff is stressed. The importance of seeking to discover the vast potentialities of every child and of providing a classroom environment that makes participation and communication possible is discussed. Guided by pedagogical and psychological insight, the partnership between teachers, parents, and architects in reconstructing a preschool is described. Teachers' experiences in restructuring the preschool are shared. (BAC)

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ED 395 665

The Environment is the Child's Condition

By
Karin Eskesen
Director
The Royal Danish School of Educational Studies, Odense Department

When I visit Danish schools and pre-schools, I am surprised how often these are designed and function on the adult's premises and conditions instead of the children's.

Does the environments of schools and pre-schools reflect how we view the children's development, behavior and learning processes?

If one considers the number of hours children spend in schools and pre-schools today, there has been a noticeable change over the last thirty years - a silent revolution at least in Denmark. The environment, which can be found in schools and pre-schools, is not related to the changes in society that influence our children's life conditions and development of norms.

In 1967, 66% of the Danish women with children under the age of 7 were housewives - today, that figure is 6 %. This corresponds well to the expansion of the pre-schools capacity within the same period.
The same tendency is valid for the schools as well - and the children spend several hours within the framework of the schools or pre-schools.

According to statistics latchkeys were created in approximately 50% of the municipalities in 1988. In 1984 1,223 children were attending school latchkeys. According to statistics 80,350 children in the age group from 6 to 10 years were attending latchkeys within the school-system in 1995. A figure that is still rising. Outside the school environment another 22,200 children are also attending other forms of day care facilities for school children. The Danish population is approximately 5 million people. Approximately 60,000 children will start in school each year.

Such explosions in the development raise the demand on teachers within schools, latchkeys and pre-schools. This applies to the aspect of content in the upbringing and education of the children, and to the demands on the design of the physical environment children have to live in during the many hours in a particular school.

Pre-schools and schools open around 6.30 in the morning and close again at 17.00. It is not unusual that children spend 8-9 hours a day in schools. A 37 hour working week and additional time for transportation are the external factors for the children. Statistics show that children stay in the latchkeys between 3,3 and 4,2 hours a day.

Pre-school children will in average spend 7.6 hours in school per day.

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Children need care and education, and we must be very critical of the role and the methods which schools and pre-schools apply. Now more than ever before. It is imperative that the choice, we as adults make on behalf of the children, is a choice which morally, ethically and culturally is based on the children's terms and development. A choice founded on perception of a child with rights. It is important, in this relation, to view schools as valuable and useful for children and their families. They spend a large part of their growth there. Schools are not compensations nor a storage facility, but a part of children's every day. For that reason we must have a close co-operation with the parents.

Childhood is a part of the entire life span that has its own qualities and special needs. At the same time childhood experiences are important factors for a person's ability to deal with its own life. Therefore, it is important that particular attention is focused on the parents' relationship to the schools. In Denmark every school and pre-school will have parentboards. But this is a formal thing, and we must still stress the importance of listening to every parent's demands to their child's upbringing and development, not just as a formal matter but as a real wish to support their child. And here teachers have many responsibilities.

Chairs and tables on a row

The interior of the elementary schools has not changed much during the last generations. The classroom with the teacher's desk and the children's chairs and tables on row is still the dominant feature. The only thing that reveals something about the grade of the children is the height of the chairs and tables.

Danish pre-schools have suggested two m2 per child. Otherwise it is anonymity and lack of identity, that marks the interior of the schools and pre-schools.

Who are responsible for this? Is it the architect that lacks understanding of educational processes? Or is it the teacher, who is unable to convey the knowledge of the importance of the environment? Perhaps it is the room, in itself, that has disciplined our behavior so much, that it is inconceivable for us to fathom the difference and makes it hard for us to alter our behavior, despite of new knowledge of educational processes' dependency on and interaction with the environment.

Schools and institutions are as a rule more often designed by someone more than for someone.

In his research , Jean Piaget suggest, that children are active creators of knowledge through their experiments. Because of that, Piaget spoke of the active educational process. Through Piaget's extensive research, in how children are active creators, it is displayed, that one of the important factors in this process is the environment. This means that both the physical conditions and the elements children need in their social, emotional, creation of knowledge, and the educational process must be available. To me, that suggests, that among other elements the classrooms must be more flexible. The children ought to be able to see the possibilities of the room.

It is quite provocative to ask, if we, in the schools and pre-schools, waste the children's time. What the children have to do to occupy themselves does not appear to them until the teacher arrives with materials at the beginning of the activity, or perhaps even later - namely, the exact time it takes from the teacher's lounge, or the library, to the classroom. And in between the children have become uneasy, and it will take another five or ten minutes before they have settled down. The children are often in a waiting position - waiting to be entertained, waiting to serviced.

The way we have organized ourselves indicate that we, the adults, forget that the schools are not just places where culture transition occurs, but a place where the production of culture is the outcome. There are, however, signs that the importance of the room is beginning to get the attention it requires in the educational debate in Denmark - in the schools and pre-schools. The importance of Piaget's research, and its significance for children's learning processes on the identity, is also recognized by the Reggio Emilia educational approach.

The environment/the classroom must be understood in relation to its contents, and at least the relations that it offers. It is not only a matter of function and plenitude of things, but the internal significance to eachother, whether they are stimulating, invite to investigation and arouse curiosity, and support the child's learning process.

The room must capture the child's interest over time. It must not prescribe but suggest the possibilities, indicate the ideas - offer a solution. Secondly, the room must inspire to a group and simultaneously support the child's individual opportunities, and its right to be the main person.

It was one of Loris Malaguzzi's cardinal thoughts that the child's conditions and the well planned environment have direct influence on the development of the brain. He pointed to Piaget's research, which recognizes the biological, philosophical and pedagogical aspects' importance in designing the rooms.

David Weikart, director of the High/Scope project through many years, emphasizes that well designed environment seem to inspire the children to be good at planning their activities, to be responsible and excellent decisionmakers.

The American psychologist Howard Gardner refers to Piaget's research as well as the core of his theoretical considerations concerning important elements in children's learning processes. Gardner discusses five intelligences, which are important to consider, when children learn.

This brings to mind, the Danish researcher Kjeld Fredens, who has formulated it this way, "Intelligence is not something you are born with, but something you do".

The Swedes F. Dover-Østerberg and Ingrid Pramling express it this way, "If one wants to figure out how children think, one must put the children in situations, wherein they have to think. Children, as well as adults, take many daily elements for granted and selfevident. Presumably, it has to be like that if one has to absorb all impressions".

Documentation as a Way of Learning

In Reggio Emilia they are convinced that pedagogical practice demands a constant analysis and contemplation, if the pedagogical practice is to be changed and developed. That requires a professional attitude from the teacher. That is why a lot of time is spend on documentation. The display of the pedagogical practice to the children, the parents and the staffs is an important part of the learning processes. By documenting what the children and the adults make together a consciousness about the consequences of their own actions is developed. The documentation is so extensive and detailed that it supplies us with new knowledge about children's learning.

The work is carried out with extreme care. It is possible to observe how the children in Reggio Emilia's pre-schools are attentive and intense in their efforts in various projects. Perhaps it is because the teachers do not have to investigate, but constantly demonstrate an interest in the children's doing.

Perhaps it is quite simple - children develop in co-existence with their environment and the teacher supports and helps the child to recognize and understand the extraordinary world that surrounds them. If the teacher is to understand the child, the teacher has to understand how the child views the world.

The work with themes and projects structures and organizes the daily routines in the pre-schools. Motor function abilities and knowledge are relations the children are familiar with and which appeals to their fantasies and imagination. The world reveals itself for the children in the projects. An important aspect of the project is the curiosity of the teacher, which makes it possible to avoid superficiality and disinterest in the work. In order for the teacher to work this way, she has to realize that it is vital to let the children assume responsibility and achieve an identity in a modern world, and at the same time it is important for the teacher to retain the authority of an adult.

To exemplify the significance of documentation, two cases help us to understand how it promotes the active learning process. In the first project the teacher wanted to know what five-year-old children knew about mathematics and which parts of mathematics made an impression on the children. Through repeated visits to a school the teacher listened intensely to the children. Then he introduced math-tests and material, for instance buttons the children could sort according to various catagories, like the size of the buttons, whether the buttons were ugly or pretty, or what their colors and shapes were. Even though he applied the tests to the children's games and development and even though the tests were resolved, it was a project based on the terms of an adult.

The second case signifies the opposite - a project in Reggio Emilia, named *The Crowd*, emerged when the teachers heard one of the children talk about her experiences from her summer at the beach.

There were lots of arms and legs. Different smells were present too. Some people smelled of sweat, others of perfume, and so forth.

On a meeting the teachers contemplated the children's curiosity and then planned a project, wherein the thesis' of the children were an interesting point to observe.

Well into the project, and after many considerations, the children agreed to create a gathering of people. They wanted to create 120 people. It was a lot. And they wanted to make them out of clay. The children discussed how they would be able to systematize this work, and so they decided that some should make the legs, some the arms, and others the bodies. But when they were to join the parts they discovered exceptional differences between the limbs and the bodies.

This was a fact they had to relate to. The children's recognition presented them with a matter of a serious nature, quite diffent from sorting buttons according to size!

The next discovery the children made was that making 120 clay people represented an almost impossible labor task. They discussed and found a solution. They were aware of the fact that when one is placed in front of a mirror, the image of two appeared. So why make a 120 if it was possible to achieve the same effect by making 60 and place them in front of mirrors. The children displayed the ability to calculate.

Both of these projects were displayed because of the documentation, since documentation was a part of the environment and a part of gaining knowledge. It was possible to monitor what happened and to analyze the process. The effect were discoveries.

Meeting the child

In order to discover the strength and vast possibilities of the child we have to listen to it. To be able to view from the child's viewpoint is the pre-condition for a serious and excellent pedagogy. In Reggio Emilia the teachers have turned this principle into practical pedagogy, in a mildly put astounding fashion. The teachers have to discover the child and realize that the individual child is a unique being.

Aron Meir Goldschmidt, a Danish poet, wrote about the "enlarged awareness" and Søren Kierkegaard wrote about education and upbringing as the art of assistance if one "in earnest had to lead a person somewhere, first of all had to find that person, where he is and start from that point. That is the art of assistance". Another Danish poet, Martin A. Hansen, wrote, "in order for anyone to teach someone else one had to learn from the person one wanted to teach".

Loris Malaguzzi respected the children and that is expressed in his thinking and philosophy, which has the starting point that children are rational beings and that children express their thoughts and emotions with "100 languages". But rarely we, the adults, realize it. We do not see the plenitude in children's expressions, we do not discover that behind their actions are thoughts.

Perhaps we do not see that the potential of the three-year-old boy, who was walking with his pre-school class, is that of a world champion in discus. The boy was eagerly throwing stones, and every time he had thrown a stone he would pivot around his own axis. He did not, as the teacher first wrongly assumed, intend to hit his friends. When she inquired what he was doing, he replied that he was doing like the man in the television. Later, his mother told the teacher that the family had been following the European Championships in Athletics on television, and that the boy had been interested in the discus-throwers.

Educating for Democracy

Another of Loris Malaguzzi's major thoughts was that the room, wherein the children play and work, ought to initiate learning processes. The environment is the third teacher, Malaguzzi said. It is in the room children have to learn to wonder. The environment is closely related to a certain and consistently view on the child as an active person. The child is not a consumer of experiences, but a creator. There is no monitoring of the children, but a trust in them. The most important element is that the children are not underestimated. The child is strong, they say in Reggio Emilia.

The biological development that is followed by social processes, shows us that the child lives in a constant interchange with nature, physical objects and other people. The child is a social being. We live in social constellations - a life in isolation is an undeveloped life.

In the pre-schools in Reggio Emilia they seek to establish so many relationships that it becomes possible for the children to participate and communicate. That is politically motivated. One must not

forget that the story behind Reggio Emilia is the story of the development of anti-fascist pedagogy after World War 2. In a democratic pedagogy it is important to create a bond between the schools and the surrounding society through an on-going dialogue where the participants are parents, responsible politicians, teachers, consultants, and children.

Through the dialogue the plenitude of the children's views can be corrected, their viewpoints can be modified and nuanced. In this process the teacher is active, she is the co-constructor of the child's knowledge - but the precondition is that she has learned to listen to the child. It is strongly emphasized to listen, to see the possibilities in other people's ideas, and then be able to ask the question that can lead to better insights.

Changing the Environment

Recently, I was involved with a reconstruction of a pre-school in Denmark. Although the school had to be rebuild within the original building, the municipality from the beginning was aware, that to rebuild the school, pedagogical/psychological insight was needed. The course of event progressed in this manner:

- First we, the teachers, the representatives for the municipalities and parents, and the architects, visited the building wherein the pre-school was placed to get an impression of the pedagogical philosophy and the actual use of the environment, if you look at the child as a capable person.
- The next step was a teaching session with an introduction to the design and importance of the environment.
- Then our discussions on how a room should be designed, when it had to apprehend the children's needs to be together, to learn, to fulfil their special interest, and at the same time their needs of being by themselves, to concentrate, began.
- And the joint effort of architechts and teachers displayed a multitude of ideas. It could be said that by our specific professions and respect for those we supported, listened to each other and sketched out what hopefully will become a good environment for the children. Altogether we have spend around 20 hours on discussing the project, listening to various needs, in order to have a full view of the project in its entirety. Based on these discussions the architects designed the new school, and the drawings were then reviewed.

The pre-school had, like most other Danish pre-schools, age integrated classes. So naturally the subject of our first discussion was the advantages of this.

From a traditional Danish point of view children learn from each other. The young children learn from watching what and how the older children play. And this is important knowledge when the principle of teaching the children is the concept of children learning by free play.

We decided to make an analysis of, whether the children's free play were as good, and tutorial and uninterrupted, as the teachers supposed they were, and whether a classroom could meet the needs of the 6-month-old child, the three-year-old child and the six-year-old child at the same time.

On the basis on the analysis, and theoretical studies on children's development, the teachers decided to sort the children according to their age. At the same time it was emphasized that it was important to have an open environment, so that children from one group had the opportunity of mixing with other age groups.

New Experiences

Recently we have gathered som experiences from this restructuring of the pre-school and the following samples are experiences presented by the teachers:

The group of Minors-nursery:

- We see more opportunities in the building. It has become easier for the adults to take initiatives and make decisions according to a specific age group.
- To support the 3-year-old children it is important with repetitions - we will often take a walk to the docks, and every time we are there we also take a look at the fountains at the main square, which the children enjoy.
- It has become easier to see how the children use the classroom. Earlier, the younger children's capacities were ignored when a more clever (older) child was around. The younger children were overprotected and did not get a chance to show what they were capable of doing.
- We have discovered that the children were able to do many things we did not anticipate. They could wipe their ovn mouth.
- They could pass out fruit. And we also discovered that we had to be more specific in the way we talked. If we say, "Could you please pass on the fruit", the children would take one piece of fruit and pass that on. So we have to say, "Could you please pass on the fruit on the plate".
- We have also discovered that the younger children now feel so secure that they like to take over the whole building, when the older children are out. We discovered that their ability to solve many conflicts by themselves were well developed. The other day, we, the adults, had decided that we should go for a walk. Suddenly, we saw that meant we would ruin a good game. The children were all concentrated and focused on playing. All of them involved in the activity. An element we might not have realized earlier, when there was no division of the children according to age, because children of different age groups have different needs and focus.

The Middle Group-nursery:

- In the beginning the 2-2½-year-olds sought back to their old classroom. Despite their age they try to find an identity. Also when it comes to defining their role according to gender.
- Sometimes we, the adults, interfere too soon. We need to learn to let them handle things by themselves more often.
- The transistion from being an infant to a young child seems to be more difficult than we realized, when we had to extend our attention to different age group and developmental stages.

The Elders-nursery

- The groups are composed from various groups of children. The children's games are now calmer. The younger children do not interfere or disturb the older children and vice versa any more.
- The children will often ask for paper and things they can use to create things with.

- We try to give them opportunity to let them solve their conflicts by themselves. We do not service them as much as we used to. They are capable of handling lots of things themselves. Eating is no longer a matter of feeding the children. They control it themselves.
- We are more relaxed in our relationship with the children.
- According to the parents, sisters and brothers relate better to each other at home after the divison according to age.
- The children are good at using the building and they constantly expand the area they play in.

The Minors - In pre-school

- We received fourteen 3-year-old children which gives us several possibilities, since they are not familiar with routines.
- We, the adults, however, seem to have a problem with the routines.
- It is important for the 3-year-old that they are allowed to investigate their surroundings.
- It is important that we, the adults, secure a certain level of repetition, since it creates stability and security. Repetition and stability is an important factor for the children.
- Now we can pay attention to them and comfort them.
- We try to avoid that they experience too many failures. But at the same time we agree that it is important that the children are allowed to solve their own conflicts, take responsibility and meet challenges.

The Middle Group - In pre-school

- The children are good at games and are able to do more than we anticipated.
- They are in search for limits and are very interested in role plays - searching for new identities.
- We, the adults, are to quick to support them too much - and need to give them time to make the progresses themselves and to make their own choices.

The Eldest - In pre-school

- Conflicts, which earlier were visible amongst the elder children, have disappeared. It could be because they are together with children of their own age. And they enjoy it and are not so often disturbed.
- We believed that our school signified openness, that friends could visit each other. But it is clear now, that the openness existed in our minds only.
- We believed that everybody played together with friends of their own choice, if they wanted to. But that has just started now and the children have become much calmer and are able to spend more time playing.
- And at the same time an important lesson has been that we, the teachers, have to be more careful with our own ambitions, stressing and putting pressure on the children.

New Opportunities

The next step in the teachers' training is to work with documentation of the pedagogical work. That is a step in the training process which we have just started. At the same time we have considered that a joint project for the school has to be related to the reconstruction of the building.

That way we can secure that the children's concerns, questions, worries and expectations for their new house is heard and discussed.

On a meeting, held recently with the parents, the reason and plan for the reconstruction was on the agenda. 80 parents participated in the meeting and had the opportunity to comment on the project. Now we are looking forward to the end of the reconstruction, and that the long process from political decision to realization has finished.

The teachers have to continue educating themselves and to consider how the environment is going to be used in order to benefit the children. Our conclusion of the discussion is: An ideal environment does not solve anything by itself, but linked together with opinions and professionalism a useful unity can be created.

Another example on how it is possible to deal with this aspect can be seen from the following: A director for the schools in a small municipality wanted to have a discussion on how the various cultures, methods and values that children meet in their first year in school could enrich each other.

The conflict between pre-school teachers and elementary school teachers had to be solved, as the children were loosers.

The pre-school teachers' opinion on and understanding of the children's development as the governing factor in the choice of content and method was in opposition to the teachers' perception of the teacher as conveyer of exact knowledge and disciplines. In Denmark the first 4 years in school is usually organized as follows: The first year they attend preparation class for 20 hours each week. A pre-school teacher is in charge of the class. Through first to third grade the children attend school for 20-25 hours a week, the class is lead by an elementary school teacher. Latchkeys after schoolhour facilities, which almost 75 % of the children attend are open from 6.00 to 17.00 with a pre-school teacher in charge.

Together with the Royal Danish School of Educational Studies, the director and representatives from the school teachers and pre-school teachers, a training session was planned. It consisted of concepts like the active learning process, the significance of the environment and the importance of this for the active learning process, as well as the two cultures significance for the children's educational experiences. 31 teachers and pre-school teachers from the latchkeys attended this training session during 90 hours. All the schools in the municipality were represented.

One of the most exiting issues was looking at the environment/the classroom in each school. A part of this issue was talking about each school's objective, possibilities, legislation, the children's pre-condition, and the specific cultural aspects of the local area.

It turned out to be a very interesting training session. The individual school's employees saw, through their discussions and the training programme, new perspectives. Following objectives were discussed: planning of the education, looking on new ways to be together. Discussions on how to use the existing facilities in new ways were started.

New opportunities that no one had been able to imagine appeared. One school "discovered" 100 m2 that was used twice a week for a choir. They could now be a part of the daily life. Another school

found several square meters by rearranging a room and blocking a door. Suggestions on how to use the classrooms and the rearranged rooms showed new possibilities.

In connection to the review of the individual groups/schools' suggestions for changes we decided to visit each school. That way we experienced to get close to the designs and the schools. We discovered, that even if the schools were under the same political and administrative control, and basically were designed at the same time, there was a major local influence. We had small "cultural surprises" and discovered that it was not just a matter of two different groups of professional's attitudes, but a question of the culture on the individual school, and in the local area, that mattered.

On the individual schools there had to be extensive discussions, and the participants met severe opposition from their colleagues. Parts of the traditional work in the schools had to be abolished or changed if the learning approach should change.

Never the less, the initiative from the director proved to be interesting. The participants had extensive discussions about teacher professionalism, human values and commitment, and teacher responsibilities.

Everybody understood, that even if it was not possible to build new schools, and even if there were limitations, there were - despite everything else - a vast array of possibilities for changes within the existing environment.

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Program for studietur til Italien
fra den 24. februar til 2. marts 1996

24. februar		Afrejse fra Svendborg 6^{30} (Havnen). Overnatning på Hotel di Gams, Beilngries.
25. februar		Afrejse fra Beilingries kl. 7^{30}.
25. & 26. februar		Overnatning på hotel Arcobaleno, Via Momme Pistoia.
26. & 27. februar		Besøg på institutioner i Pistoia. Introduktion ved pædagogisk konsulent Annalia Galardini.
27., 28. &. 29. februar		Overnatning på Starhotel Milano Excelsior, Via Pietramellara 51 Bologna.
28. februar	9^{30}	Besøg i børnehaven Don Milani
	11^{00}	Besøg i børnehaven og legecenteret Cantalamessa.
	13^{00}	Frokost (Er ikke inkluderet i prisen, men restauranten er bestilt).
	14^{30}	Besøg på dokumentations- og uddannelsescenter, ved dott. Piero Sacchetto.
29. februar		Besøg på institutioner i Cesenatico-Forli Introduktion ved skoledirektør Gianpiero Lippi
1. marts		Afrejse fra Bologna. Kulturelt besøg arrangeres fredag formiddag. Overnatning på Hotel di Gams, Beilngries.
2. marts		Afrejse fra Hotel di Gams, Beilngries kl. 7^{30}. Der er bestilt plads på færgen fra Kiel kl. 16^{45}. (Dog kan trafikforhold forhindre, at vi når færgen.)